**The Hunger Games – Excerpts from Part II: “The Games” chapters 10-18**

**Chapter 10** (starts on page 113 in the digital PDF copy) – all pages in digital PDF copy!

**Setting**: Training Center, night before games (pp. 116-117 in digital PDF copy) –

After dinner, we watch the replay in the sitting room. I seem frilly and shallow, twirling and giggling in my dress, although the others assure me I am charming. Peeta actually is charming and then utterly winning as the boy in love. And there I am, blushing and confused, made beautiful by Cinna’s hands, desirable by Peeta’s confession, tragic by circumstance, and by all accounts, unforgettable. When the anthem finishes and the screen goes dark, a hush falls on the room. Tomorrow at dawn, we will be roused and prepared for the arena. The actual Games don’t start until ten because so many of the Capitol residents rise late. But Peeta and I must make an early start. There is no telling how far we will travel to the arena that has been prepared for this year’s Games.

I know Haymitch and Effie will not be going with us. As soon as they leave here, they’ll be at the Games Headquarters, hopefully madly signing up our sponsors, working out a strategy on how and when to deliver the gifts to us. Cinna and Portia will travel with us to the very spot from which we will be launched into the arena. Still final good-byes must be said here.

Effie takes both of us by the hand and, with actual tears in her eyes, wishes us well. Thanks us for being the best tributes it has ever been her privilege to sponsor. And then, because it’s Effie and she’s apparently required by law to say something awful, she adds “I wouldn’t be at all surprised if I finally get promoted to a decent district next year!”

Then she kisses us each on the cheek and hurries out, overcome with either the emotional parting or the possible improvement of her fortunes.

Haymitch crosses his arms and looks us both over.

“Any final words of advice?” asks Peeta.

“When the gong sounds, get the hell out of there. You’re neither of you up to the blood bath at the Cornucopia. Just clear out, put as much distance as you can between yourselves and the others, and find a source of water,” he says. “Got it?”

“And after that?” I ask.

“Stay alive,” says Haymitch. It’s the same advice he gave us on the train, but he’s not drunk and laughing this time. And we only nod. What else is there to say?

**Pp. 119-120 – digital PDF copy**

***Setting:*** on roof of Training Center

I come up beside him and lean over the edge of the rail. The wide streets are full of dancing people. I squint to make out their tiny figures in more detail. “Are they in costumes?” “Who could tell?” Peeta answers. “With all the crazy clothes they wear here. Couldn’t sleep, either?”

“Couldn’t turn my mind off,” I say.

“Thinking about your family?” he asks.

“No,” I admit a bit guiltily. “All I can do is wonder about tomorrow. Which is pointless, of course.” In the light from below, I can see his face now, the awkward way he holds his bandaged hands. “I really am sorry about your hands.”

“It doesn’t matter, Katniss,” he says. “I’ve never been a contender in these Games anyway.”

“That’s no way to be thinking,” I say.

“Why not? It’s true. My best hope is to not disgrace myself and . . .” He hesitates.

“And what?” I say.

“I don’t know how to say it exactly. Only . . . I want to die as myself. Does that make any sense?” he asks. I shake my head. How could he die as anyone but himself? “I don’t want them to change me in there. Turn me into some kind of monster that I’m not.”

I bite my lip feeling inferior. While I’ve been ruminating on the availability of trees, Peeta has been struggling with how to maintain his identity. His purity of self.

“Do you mean you won’t kill anyone?” I ask. “No, when the time comes, I’m sure I’ll kill just like everybody else. I can’t go down without a fight. Only I keep wishing I could think of a way to . . . to show the Capitol they don’t own me. That I’m more than just a piece in their Games,” says Peeta.

“But you’re not,” I say. “None of us are. That’s how the Games work.”

“Okay, but within that framework, there’s still you, there’s still me,” he insists. “Don’t you see?”

“A little. Only . . . no offense, but who cares, Peeta?” I say.

“I do. I mean, what else am I allowed to care about at this point?” he asks angrily. He’s locked those blue eyes on mine now, demanding an answer.

I take a step back. “Care about what Haymitch said. About staying alive.”

Peeta smiles at me, sad and mocking. “Okay. Thanks for the tip, sweetheart.”

It’s like a slap in the face. His use of Haymitch’s patronizing endearment. “Look, if you want to spend the last hours of your life planning some noble death in the arena, that’s your choice. I want to spend mine in District Twelve.”

“Wouldn’t surprise me if you do,” says Peeta. “Give my mother my best when you make it back, will you?”

“Count on it,” I say. Then I turn and leave the roof.

**Chapter 11**

**pp. 125-128 in digital PDF copy**

***Setting: Hunger games arena***

Sixty seconds. That’s how long we’re required to stand on our metal circles before the sound of a gong releases us. Step off before the minute is up, and land mines blow your legs off. Sixty seconds to take in the ring of tributes all equidistant from the Cornucopia, a giant golden horn shaped like a cone with a curved tail, the mouth of which is at least twenty feet high, spilling over with the things that will give us life here in the arena. Food, containers of water, weapons, medicine, garments, fire starters. Strewn around the Cornucopia are other supplies, their value decreasing the farther they are from the horn. For instance, only a few steps from my feet lays a three-foot square of plastic. Certainly it could be of some use in a downpour. But there in the mouth, I can see a tent pack that would protect from almost any sort of weather. If I had the guts to go in and fight for it against the other twenty-three tributes. Which I have been instructed not to do.

We’re on a flat, open stretch of ground. A plain of hard-packed dirt. Behind the tributes across from me, I can see nothing, indicating either a steep downward slope or even cliff. To my right lies a lake. To my left and back, sparse piney woods. This is where Haymitch would want me to go. Immediately.

I hear his instructions in my head. “Just clear out, put as much distance as you can between yourselves and the others, and find a source of water.”

But it’s tempting, so tempting, when I see the bounty waiting there before me. And I know that if I don’t get it, someone else will. That the Career Tributes who survive the bloodbath will divide up most of these life-sustaining spoils. Something catches my eye. There, resting on a mound of blanket rolls, is a silver sheath of arrows and a bow, already strung, just waiting to be engaged. *That’s mine,* I think. *It’s meant for me.*

I’m fast. I can sprint faster than any of the girls in our school although a couple can beat me in distance races. But this forty-yard length, this is what I am built for. I know I can get it, I know I can reach it first, but then the question is how quickly can I get out of there? By the time I’ve scrambled up the packs and grabbed the weapons, others will have reached the horn, and one or two I might be able to pick off, but say there’s a dozen, at that close range, they could take me down with the spears and the clubs. Or their own powerful fists.

Still, I won’t be the only target. I’m betting many of the other tributes would pass up a smaller girl, even one who scored an eleven in training, to take out their more fierce adversaries.

Haymitch has never seen me run. Maybe if he had he’d tell me to go for it. Get the weapon. Since that’s the very weapon that might be my salvation. And I only see one bow in that whole pile. I know the minute must be almost up and will have to decide what my strategy will be and I find myself positioning my feet to run, not away into the stir rounding forests but toward the pile, toward the bow. When suddenly I notice Peeta, he’s about five tributes to my right, quite a fair distance, still I can tell he’s looking at me and I think he might be shaking his head. But the sun’s in my eyes, and while I’m puzzling over it the gong rings out.

And I’ve missed it! I’ve missed my chance! Because those extra couple of seconds I’ve lost by not being ready are enough to change my mind about going in. My feet shuffle for a moment, confused at the direction my brain wants to take and then I lunge forward, scoop up the sheet of plastic and a loaf of bread. The pickings are so small and I’m so angry with Peeta for distracting me that I sprint in twenty yards to retrieve a bright orange backpack that could hold anything because I can’t stand leaving with virtually nothing.

A boy, I think from District 9, reaches the pack at the same time I do and for a brief time we grapple for it and then he coughs, splattering my face with blood. I stagger back, repulsed by the warm, sticky spray. Then the boy slips to the ground. That’s when I see the knife in his back. Already other tributes have reached the Cornucopia and are spreading out to attack. Yes, the girl from District 2, ten yards away, running toward me, one hand clutching a half-dozen knives. I’ve seen her throw in training. She never misses. And I’m her next target.

All the general fear I’ve been feeling condenses into at immediate fear of this girl, this predator who might kill me in seconds. Adrenaline shoots through me and I sling the pack over one shoulder and run full speed for the woods. I can hear the blade whistling toward me and reflexively hike the pack up to protect my head. The blade lodges in the pack. Both straps on my shoulders now, I make for the trees. Somehow I know the girl will not pursue me. That she’ll be drawn back into the Cornucopia before all the good stuff is gone. A grin crosses my face. *Thanks for the knife,* I think.

At the edge of the woods I turn for one instant to survey the field. About a dozen or so tributes are hacking away at one another at the horn. Several lie dead already on the ground. Those who have taken flight are disappearing into the trees or into the void opposite me. I continue running until the woods have hidden me from the other tributes then slow into a steady jog that I think I can maintain for a while. For the next few hours, I alternate between jogging and walking, putting as much distance as I can between myself and my competitors. I lost my bread during the struggle with the boy from District 9 but managed to stuff my plastic in my sleeve so as I walk I fold it neatly and tuck it into a pocket. I also free the knife — it’s a fine one with a long sharp blade, serrated near the handle, which will make it handy for sawing through things — and slide it into my belt. I don’t dare stop to examine the contents of the pack yet. I just keep moving, pausing only to check for pursuers.

I can go a long time. I know that from my days in the woods. But I will need water. That was Haymitch’s second instruction, and since I sort of botched the first, I keep a sharp eye out for any sign of it. No luck.

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**PP. 134-135 digital PDF version**

But the Careers stop in the clearing about ten yards from my tree. They have flashlights, torches. I can see an arm here, a boot there, through the breaks in the branches. I turn to stone, not even daring to breathe. Have they spotted me? No, not yet. I can tell from their words their minds are elsewhere.

“Shouldn’t we have heard a cannon by now?”

“I’d say yes. Nothing to prevent them from going in immediately.”

“Unless she isn’t dead.”

“She’s dead. I stuck her myself.”

“Then where’s the cannon?”

“Someone should go back. Make sure the job’s done.”

“Yeah, we don’t want to have to track her down twice.”

“I said she’s dead!”

An argument breaks out until one tribute silences the others. “We’re wasting time! I’ll go finish her and let’s move on!”

I almost fall out of the tree. The voice belongs to Peeta.

**Chapter 12**

**Pp. 136-137, 139 in digital PDF version**

“Go on, then, Lover Boy,” says the boy from District 2. “See for yourself.”

I just get a glimpse of Peeta, lit by a torch, heading back to the girl by the fire. His face is swollen with bruises, there’s a bloody bandage on one arm, and from the sound of his gait he’s limping somewhat. I remember him shaking him his head, telling me not to go into the fight for the supplies, when all along, all along he’d planned to throw himself into the thick of things. Just the opposite of what Haymitch had mid him to do.

Okay, I can stomach that. Seeing all those supplies was tempting. But this . . . this other thing. This teaming up with the Career wolf pack to hunt down the rest of us. No one from District 12 would think of doing such a thing! Career tributes are overly vicious, arrogant, better fed, but only because they’re the Capitol’s lapdogs.

Universally, solidly hated by all but those from their own districts. I can imagine the things they’re saying about him back home now. And Peeta had the gall to talk to me about disgrace? Obviously, the noble boy on the rooftop was playing just one more game with me. But this will be his last. I will eagerly watch the night skies for signs of his death, if I don’t kill him first myself.

**….**

“Move,” I whisper to myself. I wriggle out of my sleeping bag, roll it up, and place it in the pack. I take a deep breath. While I’ve been concealed by darkness and the sleeping bag and the willow branches, it has probably been difficult for the cameras to get a good shot of me. I know they must be tracking me now though. The minute I hit the ground, I’m guaranteed a close-up.

The audience will have been beside themselves, knowing I was in the tree, that I overheard the Careers talking, that I discovered Peeta was with them. Until I work out exactly how I want to play that, I’d better at least act on top of things. Not perplexed. Certainly not confused or frightened.

No, I need to look one step ahead of the game.

So as I slide out of the foliage and into the dawn light, I pause a second, giving the cameras time to lock on me. Then I cock my head slightly to the side and give a knowing smile. There! Let them figure out what that means!

**…**

**pp. 140-141**

Morning brings distress. My heads throbs with every beat of my heart. Simple movements send stabs of pain through my joints. I fall, rather than jump from the tree. It takes several minutes for me to assemble my gear. Somewhere inside me, I know this is wrong. I should be acting with more caution, moving with more urgency. But my mind seems foggy and forming a plan is hard. I lean back against the trunk of my tree, one finger gingerly stroking the sandpaper surface of my tongue, as I assess my options. How can I get water? Return to the lake. No good. I’d never make it. Hope for rain. There’s not a cloud in the sky.

Keep looking. Yes, this is my only chance. But then, another thought hits me, and the surge of anger that follows brings me to me senses.

Haymitch! He could send me water! Press a button and have it delivered to me in a silver parachute in minutes. I know I must have sponsors, at least one or two who could afford a pint of liquid for me. Yes, it’s pricey, but these people, they’re made of money. And they’ll be betting on me as well. Perhaps Haymitch doesn’t realize how deep my need is. I say in a voice as loud as I dare. “Water.” I wait, hopefully, for a parachute to descend from the sky. But nothing is forthcoming.

Something is wrong. Am I deluded about having sponsors? Or has Peeta’s behavior made them all hang back? No, I don’t believe it. There’s someone out there who wants to buy me water only Haymitch is refusing to let it go through. As my mentor, he gets to control the flow of gifts from the sponsors. I know he hates me. He’s made that clear enough. But enough to let me die? From this? He can’t do that, can he? If a mentor mistreats his tributes, he’ll be held accountable by the viewers, by the people back in District 12.

Even Haymitch wouldn’t risk that, would he? Say what you will about my fellow traders in the Hob, but I don’t think they’d welcome him back there if he let me die this way. And then where would he get his liquor? So . . . what? Is he trying to make me suffer for defying him? Is he directing all the sponsors toward Peeta? Is he just too drunk to even notice what’s going on at the moment? Somehow I don’t believe that and I don’t believe he’s trying to kill me off by neglect, either.

He has, in fact, in his own unpleasant way, genuinely been trying to prepare me for this. Then what is going on? I bury my face in my hands. There’s no danger of tears now, I couldn’t produce one to save my life. What is Haymitch doing? Despite my anger, hatred, and suspicions, a small voice in the back of my head whispers an answer. *Maybe he’s sending you a message,* it says. A message. Saying what?

Then I know. There’s only one good reason Haymitch could be withholding water from me. Because he knows I’ve almost found it.

I grit my teeth and pull myself to my feet. My backpack seems to have tripled in weight. I find a broken branch that will do for a walking stick and I start off. The sun’s beating down, even more searing than the first two days. I feel like an old piece of leather, drying and cracking in the heat. every step is an effort, but I refuse to stop. I refuse to sit down. If I sit, there’s a good chance I won’t be able to get up again, that I won’t even remember my task.

What easy prey I am! Any tribute, even tiny Rue, could take me right now, merely shove me over and kill me with my own knife, and I’d have little strength to resist. But if anyone is in my part of the woods, they ignore me. The truth is, I feel a million miles from another living soul.

Not alone though. No, they’ve surely got a camera tracking me now. I think back to the years of watching tributes starve, freeze, bleed, and dehydrate to death. Unless there’s a really good fight going on somewhere, I’m being featured. My thoughts turn to Prim. It’s likely she won’t be watching me live, but they’ll show updates at the school during lunch. For her sake, I try to look as least desperate as I can.

But by afternoon, I know the end is coming. My legs are shaking and my heart too quick. I keep forgetting, exactly what I’m doing. I’ve stumbled repeatedly and managed to regain my feet, but when the stick slides out from under me, I finally tumble to the ground unable to get up. I let my eyes close.

I have misjudged Haymitch. He has no intention of helping me at all. *This is all right,* I think. *This is not so bad here.* The air is less hot, signifying evening’s approach. There’s a slight, sweet scent that reminds me of lilies. My fingers stroke the smooth ground, sliding easily across the top. *This is an okay place to die,* I think.

My fingertips make small swirling patterns in the cool, slippery earth. *I love mud,* I think. How many times I’ve tracked game with the help of its oft, readable surface. Good for bee stings, too. Mud. Mud. Mud! My eyes fly open and I dig my fingers into the earth. It is mud! My nose lifts in the air. And those are lilies! Pond lilies!

**Chapter 13**

**P. 146 in digital PDF version**

This was no tribute’s campfire gone out of control, no accidentaloccurrence. The flames that bear down on me have an unnatural height, a uniformity that marks them as human-made, machine-made, Gamemakermade. Things have been too quiet today. No deaths, perhaps no fights at all. The audience in the Capitol will be getting bored, claiming that these Games are verging on dullness. This is the one thing the Games must not do.

It’s not hard to follow the Gamemakers’ motivation. There is the Career pack and then there are the rest of us, probably spread far and thin across the arena. This fire is designed to flush us out, to drive us together. It may not be the most original device I’ve seen, but it’s very, very effective.

I hurdle over a burning log. Not high enough. The tail end of my jacket catches on fire and I have to stop to rip it from my body and stamp out the flames. But I don’t dare leave the jacket, scorched and smoldering as it is, I take the risk of shoving it in my sleeping bag, hoping the lack of air will quell what I haven’t extinguished. This is all I have, what I carry on my back, and it’s little enough to survive with.

…

**Pp. 148-149**

How long I scramble along dodging the fireballs I can’t say, but the attacks finally begin to abate. Which is good, because I’m retching again. This time it’s an acidic substance that scalds my throat and makes its way into my nose as well. I’m forced to stop as my body convulses, trying desperately to rid itself of the poisons I’ve been sucking in during the attack. I wait for the next hiss, the next signal to bolt. It doesn’t come. The force of the retching has squeezed tears out of my stinging eyes. My clothes are drenched in sweat. Somehow, through the smoke and vomit, I pick up the scent of singed hair. My hand fumbles to my braid and finds a fireball has seared off at least six inches of it. Strands of blackened hair crumble in my fingers. I stare at them, fascinated by the transformation, when the hissing registers.

My muscles react, only not fast enough this time. The fireball crashes into the ground at my side, but not before it skids across my right calf. Seeing my pants leg on fire sends me over the edge. I twist and scuttle backward on my hands and feet, shrieking, trying to remove myself from the horror. When I finally regain enough sense, I roll the leg back and forth on the ground, which stifles the worst of it. But then, without thinking, I rip away the remaining fabric with my bare hands.

I sit on the ground, a few yards from the blaze set off by the fireball. My calf is screaming, my hands covered in red welts. I’m shaking too hard to move. If the Gamemakers want to finish me off, now is the time.

I hear Cinna’s voice, carrying images of rich fabric and sparkling gems. “Katniss, the girl who was on fire.” What a good laugh the Gamemakers must be having over that one. Perhaps, Cinna’s beautiful costumes have even brought on this particular torture for me. I know he couldn’t have foreseen this, must be hurting for me because, in fact, I believe he cares about me. But all in all, maybe showing up stark naked in that chariot would have been safer for me

**….**

**Pp. 153-154**

The Careers regroup on the ground and I can hear them growling conspiratorially among themselves, furious I have made them look foolish. But twilight has arrived and their window of attack on me is closing. Finally, I hear Peeta say harshly, “Oh, let her stay up there. It’s not like she’s going anywhere. We’ll deal with her in the morning.”

Well, he’s right about one thing. I’m going nowhere. All the relief from the pool water has gone, leaving me to feel the full potency of my burns. I scoot down to a fork in the tree and clumsily prepare for bed. Put on my jacket. Lay out my sleeping bed. Belt myself in and try to keep from moaning. The heat of the bag’s too much for my leg. I cut a slash in the fabric and hang my calf out in the open air. I drizzle water on the wound, my hands.

All my bravado is gone. I’m weak from pain and hunger but can’t bring myself to eat. Even if I can last the night, what will the morning bring? I stare into the foliage trying to will myself to rest, but the burns forbid it. Birds are settling down for the night, singing lullabies to their young. Night creatures emerge. An owl hoots. The faint scent of a skunk cuts through the smoke. The eyes of some animal peer at me from the neighboring tree — a possum maybe — catching the firelight from the Careers’ torches. Suddenly, I’m up on one elbow. Those are no possum’s eyes, I know their glassy reflection too well. In fact, those are not animal eyes at all. In the last dim rays of light, I make her out, watching me silently from between the branches. Rue.

How long has she been here? The whole time probably. Still and unobserved as the action unfolded beneath her. Perhaps she headed up her tree shortly before I did, hearing the pack was so close. For a while we hold each other’s gaze. Then, without even rustling a leaf, her little hand slides into the open and points to something above my head.

**Chapter 14**

**pp. 155-156**

My eyes follow the line of her finger up into the foliage above me. At first, I have no idea what she’s pointing to, but then, about fifteen feet up, I make out the vague shape in the dimming light. But of . . . of what? Some sort of animal? It looks about the size of a raccoon, but it hangs from the bottom of a branch, swaying ever so slightly. There’s something else. Among the familiar evening sounds of the woods, my ears register a low hum. Then I know. It’s a wasp nest.

Fear shoots through me, but I have enough sense to keep still. After all, I don’t know what kind of wasp lives there. It could be the ordinary leave-us-alone-and-we’ll-leave-you-alone type. But these are the Hunger Games, and ordinary isn’t the norm. More likely they will be one of the Capitol’s muttations, tracker jackers. Like the jabberjays, these killer wasps were spawned in a lab and strategically placed, like land mines, around the districts during the war. Larger than regular wasps, they have a distinctive solid gold body and a sting that raises a lump the size of a plum on contact. Most people can’t tolerate more than a few stings. Some die at once. If you live, the hallucinations brought on by the venom have actually driven people to madness. And there’s another thing, these wasps will hunt down anyone who disturbs their nest and attempt to kill them. That’s where the tracker part of the name comes from.

After the war, the Capitol destroyed all the nests surrounding their city, but the ones near the districts were left untouched. Another reminder of our weakness, I suppose, just like the Hunger Games. Another reason to keep inside the fence of District 12. When Gale and I come across a tracker jacker nest, we immediately head in the opposite direction. So is that what hangs above me? I look back to Rue for help, but she’s melted into her tree.

Given my circumstances, I guess it doesn’t matter what type of wasp nest it is. I’m wounded and trapped. Darkness has given me a brief reprieve, but by the time the sun rises, the Careers will have formulated a plan to kill me. There’s no way they could do otherwise after I’ve made them look so stupid. That nest may be the sole option I have left. If I can drop it down on them, I may be able to escape. But I’ll risk my life in the process.

Of course, I’ll never be able to get in close enough to the actual nest to cut it free. I’ll have to saw off the branch at the trunk and send the whole thing down. The serrated portion of my knife should be able to manage that. But can my hands? And will the vibration from the sawing raise the swarm? And what if the Careers figure out what I’m doing and move their camp? That would defeat the whole purpose. I realize that the best chance I’ll have to do the sawing without drawing notice will be during the anthem. That could begin any time. I drag myself out of my bag, make sure my knife is secured in my belt, and begin to make my way up the tree. This in itself is dangerous since the branches are becoming precariously thin even for me, but I persevere. When I reach the limb that supports the nest, the humming becomes more distinctive. But it’s still oddly subdued if these are tracker jackers. *It’s the* *smoke,* I think. *It’s sedated them.* This was the one defense the rebels found to battle the wasps.

**PP. 161-162**

“Do this!” I command myself. Clenching my jaw, I dig my hands under Glimmer’s body, get a hold on what must be her rib cage, and force her onto her stomach. I can’t help it, I’m hyperventilating now, the whole thing is so nightmarish and I’m losing my grasp on what’s real. I tug on the silver sheath of arrows, but it’s caught on something, her shoulder blade, something, and finally yank it free. I’ve just encircled the sheath with my arms when I hear the footsteps, several pairs, coming through the underbrush, and I realize the Careers have come back. They’ve come back to kill me or get their weapons or both.

But it’s too late to run. I pull a slimy arrow from the sheath and try to position it on the bowstring but instead of one string I see three and the stench from the stings is so repulsive I can’t do it. I can’t do it. I can’t do it.

I’m helpless as the first hunter crashes through the trees, spear lifted, poised to throw. The shock on Peeta’s face makes no sense to me. I wait for the blow. Instead his arm drops to his side.

“What are you still doing here?” he hisses at me. I stare uncomprehendingly as a trickle of water drips off a sting under his ear.

His whole body starts sparkling as if he’s been dipped in dew. “Are you mad?” He’s prodding me with the shaft of the spear now. “Get up! Get up!” I rise, but he’s still pushing at me. What? What is going on? He shoves me away from him hard. “Run!” he screams. “Run!”

Behind him, Cato slashes his way through the brush. He’s sparkling wet, too, and badly stung under one eye. I catch the gleam of sunlight on his sword and do as Peeta says. Holding tightly to my bow and arrows, banging into trees that appear out of nowhere, tripping and falling as I try to keep my balance. Back past my pool and into unfamiliar woods. The world begins to bend in alarming ways. A butterfly balloons to the size of a house then shatters into a million stars. Trees transform to blood and splash down over my boots. Ants begin to crawl out of the blisters on my hands and I can’t shake them free. They’re climbing up my arms, my neck. Someone’s screaming, a long high pitched scream that never breaks for breath. I have a vague idea it might be me. I trip and fall into a small pit lined with tiny orange bubbles that hum like the tracker jacker nest.

Tucking my knees up to my chin, I wait for death.

Sick and disoriented, I’m able to form only one thought: *Peeta Mellark just saved my life.*

**Chapter 15**

**pp. 164-165**

I gently pull the stamen through the blossom and set the drop of nectar on my tongue. The sweetness spreads through my mouth, down my throat, warming my veins with memories of summer, and my home woods and Gale’s presence beside me. For some reason, our discussion from that last morning comes back to me.

*“We could do it, you know.”*

*“What?”*

*“Leave the district. Run off. Live in the woods. You and I, we could make it.”*

And suddenly, I’m not thinking of Gale but of Peeta and . . . Peeta! *He saved my life!* I think. Because by the time we met up, I couldn’t tell what was real and what the tracker jacker venom had caused me to imagine.

But if he did, and my instincts tell me he did, what for? Is he simply working the Lover Boy angle he initiated at the interview? Or was he actually trying to protect me? And if he was, what was he doing with those Careers in the first place? None of it makes sense.

I wonder what Gale made of the incident for a moment and then I push the whole thing out of my mind because for some reason Gale and Peeta do not coexist well together in my thoughts.

So I focus on the one really good thing that’s happened since I landed in the arena. I have a bow and arrows! A full dozen arrows if you count the one I retrieved in the tree. They bear no trace of the noxious green slime that came from Glimmer’s body — which leads me to believe that might not have been wholly real — but they have a fair amount of dried blood on them. I can clean them later, but I do take a minute to shoot a few into a nearby tree. They are more like the weapons in the Training Center than my ones at home, but who cares? That I can work with.

The weapons give me an entirely new perspective on the Games. I know I have tough opponents left to face. But I am no longer merely prey that runs and hides or takes desperate measures. If Cato broke through the trees right now, I wouldn’t flee, I’d shoot. I find I’m actually anticipating the moment with pleasure.

**…**

**PP. 168-170**

“You weren’t joking, about wanting me for an ally?” she asks.

“No, I meant it,” I say. I can almost hear Haymitch groaning as I team up with this wispy child. But I want her. Because she’s a survivor, and I trust her, and why not admit it? She reminds me of Prim.

“Okay,” she says, and holds out her hand. We shake. “It’s a deal.”

Of course, this kind of deal can only be temporary, but neither of us mentions that.

Rue contributes a big handful of some sort of starchy root to the meal. Roasted over the fire, they have the sharp sweet taste of a parsnip. She recognizes the bird, too, some wild thing they call a groosling in her district. She says sometimes a flock will wander into the orchard and they get a decent lunch that day. For a while, all conversation stops as we fill our stomachs. The groosling has delicious meal that’s so fatty, the grease drips down your face when you bite into it.

“Oh,” says Rue with a sigh. “I’ve never had a whole leg to myself before.”

I’ll bet she hasn’t. I’ll bet meat hardly ever comes her way. “Take the other,” I say.

“Really?” she asks.

“Take whatever you want. Now that I’ve got a bow and arrows, I can get more. Plus I’ve got snares. I can show you how to set them,” I say. Rue still looks uncertainly at the leg. “Oh, take it,” I say, putting the drumstick in her hands. “It will only keep a few days anyway, and we’ve got the whole bird plus the rabbit.” Once she’s got hold of it, her appetite wins out and she takes a huge mouthful.

“I’d have thought, in District Eleven, you’d have a bit more to eat than us. You know, since you grow the food,” I say.

Rue’s eyes widen. “Oh, no, we’re not allowed to eat the crops.”

“They arrest you or something?” I ask.

“They whip you and make everyone else watch,” says Rue. “The mayor’s very strict about it.”

I can tell by her expression that it’s not that uncommon an occurrence. A public whipping’s a rare thing in District 12, although occasionally one occurs. Technically, Gale and I could be whipped on a daily basis for poaching in the woods — well, technically, we could get a whole lot worse — except all the officials buy our meat. Besides, our mayor, Madge’s father, doesn’t seem to have much taste for such events. Maybe being the least prestigious, poorest, most ridiculed district in the country has its advantages. Such as, being largely ignored by the Capitol as long as we produce our coal quotas.

“Do you get all the coal you want?” Rue asks.

“No,” I answer. “Just what we buy and whatever we track in on our boots.”

“They feed us a bit extra during harvest, so that people can keep going longer,” says Rue.

“Don’t you have to be in school?” I ask.

“Not during harvest. Everyone works then,” says Rue. It’s interesting, hearing about her life. We have so little communication with anyone outside our district. In fact, I wonder if the Gamemakers are blocking out our conversation, because even though the information seems harmless, they don’t want people in different districts to know about one another.

At Rue’s suggestion, we lay out all our food to plan ahead. She’s seen most of mine, but I add the last couple of crackers and beef strips to the pile. She’s gathered quite a collection of roots, nuts, greens, and even some berries.

I roll an unfamiliar berry in my fingers. “You sure this is safe?”

“Oh, yes, we have them back home. I’ve been eating them for days,” she says, popping a handful in her mouth. I tentatively bite into one, and it’s as good as our blackberries. Taking Rue on as an ally seems a better choice all the time. We divide up our food supplies, so in case we’re separated, we’ll both be set for a few days. Apart from the food, Rue has a small water skin, a homemade slingshot, and an extra pair of socks. She also has a sharp shard of rock she uses as a knife. “I know it’s not much,” she says as if embarrassed, “but I had to get away from the Cornucopia fast.”

**Chapter 16**

**pp. 177-178 (digital PDF version)**

Rue, who when you ask her what she loves most in the world, replies, of all things, “Music.”

“Music?” I say. In our world, I rank music somewhere between hair ribbons and rainbows in terms of usefulness. At least a rainbow gives you a tip about the weather. “You have a lot of time for that?”

“We sing at home. At work, too. That’s why I love your pin,” she says, pointing to the mockingjay that I’ve again forgotten about.

“You have mockingjays?” I ask.

“Oh, yes. I have a few that are my special friends. We can sing back and forth for hours. They carry messages for me,” she says.

“What do you mean?” I say.

“I’m usually up highest, so I’m the first to see the flag that signals quitting time. There’s a special little song I do,” says Rue. She opens her mouth and sings a little four-note run in a sweet, clear voice. “And the mockingjays spread it around the orchard. That’s how everyone knows to knock off,” she continues. “They can be dangerous though, if you get too near their nests. But you can’t blame them for that.”

I unclasp the pin and hold it out to her. “Here, you take it. It has more meaning for you than me.”

“Oh, no,” says Rue, closing my fingers back over the pin. “I like to see it on you. That’s how I decided I could trust you. Besides, I have this.” She pulls a necklace woven out of some kind of grass from her shirt. On it, hangs a roughly carved wooden star. Or maybe it’s a flower. “It’s a good luck charm.”

“Well, it’s worked so far,” I say, pinning the mockingjay back on my shirt. “Maybe you should just stick with that.”

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**Chapter 17**

The impact with the hard-packed earth of the plain knocks the wind out of me. My backpack does little to soften the blow. Fortunately my quiver has caught in the crook of my elbow, sparing both itself and my shoulder, and my bow is locked in my grasp. The ground still shakes with explosions. I can’t hear them. I can’t hear anything at the moment. But the apples must have set off enough mines, causing debris to activate the others. I manage to shield my face with my arms as shattered bits of matter, some of it burning, rain down around me. An acrid smoke fills the air, which is not the best remedy for someone trying to regain the ability to breathe.

After about a minute, the ground stops vibrating. I roll on my side and allow myself a moment of satisfaction the sight of the smoldering wreckage that was recently the pyramid. The Careers aren’t likely to salvage anything out of that. *I’d better get out of here,* I think. *They’ll be making a beeline for the place.* But once I’m on my feet, I realize escape may not be so simple. I’m dizzy. Not the slightly wobbly kind, but the kind that sends the trees swooping around you and causes the earth to move in waves under your feet.

I take a few steps and somehow wind up on my hands and knees. I wait a few minutes to let it pass, but it doesn’t.

Panic begins to set in. I can’t stay here. Flight is essential. But I can neither walk nor hear. I place a hand to my left ear, the one that was turned toward the blast, and it comes away bloody. Have I gone deaf from the explosion? The idea frightens me. I rely as much on my ears as my eyes as a hunter, maybe more at times. But I can’t let my fear show.

Absolutely, positively, I am live on every screen in Panem.

*No blood trails,* I tell myself, and manage to pull my hood up over my head, tie the cord under my chin with uncooperative fingers. That should help soak up the blood. I can’t walk, but can I crawl? I move forward tentatively. Yes, if I go very slowly, I can crawl. Most of the woods will offer insufficient cover. My only hope is to make it back to Rue’s copse and conceal myself in greenery. I can’t get caught out here on my hands and knees in the open. Not only will I face death, it’s sure to be a long and painful one at Cato’s hand. The thought of Prim having to watch that keeps me doggedly inching my way toward the hideout.

Another blast knocks me flat on my face. A stray mine, set off by some collapsing crate. This happens twice more. I’m reminded of those last few kernels that burst when Prim and I pop corn over the fire at home.

To say I make it in the nick of time is an understatement. I have literally just dragged myself into the tangle of hushes at the base of the trees when there’s Cato, barreling onto the plain, soon followed by his companions. His rage is so extreme it might be comical — so people really do tear out their hair and beat the ground with their fists — if I didn’t know that it was aimed at me, at what I have done to him. Add to that my proximity, my inability to run or defend myself, and in fact, the whole thing has me terrified. I’m glad my hiding place makes it impossible for the cameras to get a close shot of me because I’m biting my nails like there’s no tomorrow.

Gnawing off the last bits of nail polish, trying to keep my teeth from chattering. The boy from District 3 throws stones into the ruins and must have declared all the mines activated because the Careers are approaching the wreckage. Cato has finished the first phase of his tantrum and takes out his anger on the smoking remains by kicking open various containers. The other tributes are poking around in the mess, looking for anything to salvage, but there’s nothing. The boy from District 3 has done his job too well. This idea must occur to Cato, too, because he turns on the boy and appears to be shouting at him. The boy from District 3 only has time to turn and run before Cato catches him in a headlock from behind. I can see the muscles ripple in Cato’s arms as he sharply jerks the boy’s head to the side. It’s that quick. The death of the boy from District 3.

The other two Careers seem to be trying to calm Cato down. I can tell he wants to return to the woods, but they keep pointing at the sky, which puzzles me until I realize, *Of course. They think whoever set off the explosions is dead.*

They don’t know about the arrows and the apples. They assume the booby trap was faulty, but that the tribute who blew up the supplies was killed doing it. If there was a cannon shot, it could have been easily lost in the subsequent explosions. The shattered remains of the thief removed by hovercraft. They retire to the far side of the lake to allow the Gamemakers to retrieve the body of the boy from District 3. And they wait. I suppose a cannon goes off. A hovercraft appears and takes the dead boy. The sun dips below the horizon. Night falls. Up in the sky, I see the seal and know the anthem must have begun. A moment of darkness. They show the boy from District 3. They show the boy from District 10, who must have died this morning. Then the seal reappears. So, now they know. The bomber survived. In the seal’s light, I can see Cato and the girl from District 2 put on their night-vision glasses. The boy from District 1 ignites a tree branch for a torch, illuminating the grim determination on all their faces. The Careers stride back into the woods to hunt.

The dizziness has subsided and while my left ear is still deafened, I can hear a ringing in my right, which seems a good sign. There’s no point in leaving my hiding place, though. I’m about as safe as I can be, here at the crime scene. They probably think the bomber has a two- or three hour lead on them. Still it’s a long time before I risk moving.

The first thing I do is dig out my own glasses and put them on, which relaxes me a little, to have at least one of my hunter’s senses working. I drink some water and wash the blood from my ear. Fearing the smell of meat will draw unwanted predators — fresh blood is bad enough — I make a good meal out of the greens and roots and berries Rue and I gathered today.

Where is my little ally? Did she make it back to the rendezvous point? Is she worried about me?

At least, the sky has shown we’re both alive.

I run through the surviving tributes on my fingers. The boy from 1, both from 2, Foxface, both from 11 and 12. Just eight of us. The betting must be getting really hot in the Capitol. They’ll be doing special features on each of us now. Probably interviewing our friends and families. It’s been a long time since a tribute from District 12 made it into the top eight. And now there are two of us. Although from what Cato said, Peeta’s on his way out. Not that Cato is the final word on anything. Didn’t he just lose his entire stash of supplies?

*Let the Seventy-fourth Hunger Games begin, Cato,* I think. *Let them begin for real.*

**Chapter 18**

**pp. 195-198** (digital PDF version)

The spearhead is buried up to the shaft in her stomach. I crouch before her, staring helplessly at the embedded weapon. There’s no point in comforting words, in telling her she’ll be all right. She’s no fool. Her hand reaches out and I clutch it like a lifeline. As if it’s me who’s dying instead of Rue.

“You blew up the food?” she whispers.

“Every last bit,” I say.

“You have to win,” she says.

“I’m going to. Going to win for both of us now,” I promise. I hear a cannon and look up. It must be for the boy from District 1.

“Don’t go.” Rue tightens her grip on my hand.

“Course not. Staying right here,” I say. I move in closer to her, pulling her head onto my lap. I gently brush the dark, thick hair back behind her ear.

“Sing,” she says, but I barely catch the word.

*Sing?* I think. *Sing what?* I do know a few songs. Believe it or not, there was once music in my house, too. Music I helped make. My father pulled me in with that remarkable voice — but I haven’t sung much since he died. Except when Prim is very sick. Then I sing her the same songs she liked as a baby.

Sing. My throat is tight with tears, hoarse from smoke and fatigue.

But if this is Prim’s, I mean, Rue’s last request, I have to at least try. The song that comes to me is a simple lullaby, one we sing fretful, hungry babies to sleep with, It’s old, very old I think. Made up long ago in our hills. What my music teacher calls a mountain air. But the words are easy and soothing, promising tomorrow will be more hopeful than this awful piece of time we call today. I give a small cough, swallow hard, and begin:

*Deep in the meadow, under the willow*

*A bed of grass, a soft green pillow*

*Lay down your head, and close your sleepy eyes*

*And when again they open, the sun will rise.*

*Here it’s safe, here it’s warm*

*Here the daisies guard you from every harm*

*Here your dreams are sweet and tomorrow brings them true*

*Here is the place where I love you.*

Rue’s eyes have fluttered shut. Her chest moves but only slightly. My throat releases the tears and they slide down my cheeks. But I have to finish the song for her.

*Deep in the meadow, hidden far away*

*A cloak of leaves, a moonbeam ray*

*Forget your woes and let your troubles lay*

*And when again it’s morning, they’ll wash away.*

*Here it’s safe, here it’s warm*

*Here the daisies guard you from every harm*

The final lines are barely audible.

*Here your dreams are sweet and tomorrow brings them true*

*Here is the place where I love you.*

Everything’s still and quiet. Then, almost eerily, the mockingjays take up my song.

For a moment, I sit there, watching my tears drip down on her face. Rue’s cannon fires. I lean forward and press my lips against her temple. Slowly, as if not to wake her, I lay her head back on the ground and release her hand.

They’ll want me to clear out now. So they can collect the bodies. And there’s nothing to stay for. I roll the boy from District 1 onto his face and take his pack, retrieve the arrow that ended his life. I cut Rue’s pack from her back as well, knowing she’d want me to have it but leave the spear in her stomach. Weapons in bodies will be transported to the hovercraft.

I’ve no use for a spear, so the sooner it’s gone from the arena the better. I can’t stop looking at Rue, smaller than ever, a baby animal curled up in a nest of netting. I can’t bring myself to leave her like this. Past harm, but seeming utterly defenseless. To hate the boy from District 1, who also appears so vulnerable in death, seems inadequate. It’s the Capitol I hate, for doing this to all of us.

Gale’s voice is in my head. His ravings against the Capitol no longer pointless, no longer to be ignored. Rue’s death has forced me to confront my own fury against the cruelty, the injustice they inflict upon us. But here, even more strongly than at home, I feel my impotence. There’s no way to take revenge on the Capitol. Is there?

Then I remember Peeta’s words on the roof. *“Only I keep wishing I* *could think of a way to . . . to show the Capital they don’t own me. That I’m* *more than just a piece in their Games.”* And for the first time, I understand what he means.

I want to do something, right here, right now, to shame them, to make them accountable, to show the Capitol that whatever they do or force us to do there is a part of every tribute they can’t own. That Rue was more than a piece in their Games. And so am I. A few steps into the woods grows a bank of wildflowers. Perhaps they are really weeds of some sort, but they have blossoms in beautiful shades of violet and yellow and white. I gather up an armful and come back to Rue’s side. Slowly, one stem at a time, I decorate her body in the flowers. Covering the ugly wound. Wreathing her face. Weaving her hair with bright colors.

They’ll have to show it. Or, even if they choose to turn the cameras elsewhere at this moment, they’ll have to bring them back when they collect the bodies and everyone will see her then and know I did it. I step back and take a last look at Rue. She could really be asleep in that meadow after all.

“Bye, Rue,” I whisper. I press the three middle fingers of my left hand against my lips and hold them out in her direction. Then I walk away without looking back.

The birds fall silent. Somewhere, a mockingjay gives the warning whistle that precedes the hovercraft. I don’t know how it knows. It must hear things that humans can’t. I pause, my eyes focused on what’s ahead, not what’s happening behind me. It doesn’t take long, then the general birdsong begins again and I know she’s gone. Another mockingjay, a young one by the look of it, lands on a branch before me and bursts out Rue’s melody.

**…**

**PP. 202-204**

Eventually, I wrap up my food and go back to the stream to replenish my water and gather some. But the heaviness from the morning drapes back over me and even though it’s only early evening, I climb a tree and settle in for the night. My brain begins to replay the events from yesterday. I keep seeing Rue speared, my arrow piercing the boy’s neck. I don’t know why I should even care about the boy.

Then I realize . . . he was my first kill.

Along with other statistics they report to help people place their bets, every tribute has a list of kills. I guess technically I’d get credited for Glimmer and the girl from District 4, too, for dumping that nest on them. But the boy from District 1 was the first person I knew would die because of my actions. Numerous animals have lost their lives at my hands, but only one human. I hear Gale saying, “How different can it be, really?”

Amazingly similar in the execution. A bow pulled, an arrow shot. Entirely different in the aftermath. I killed a boy whose name I don’t even know. Somewhere his family is weeping for him. His friends call for my blood. Maybe he had a girlfriend who really believed he would come back . . .

But then I think of Rue’s still body and I’m able to banish the boy from my mind. At least, for now.

It’s been an uneventful day according to the sky. No deaths. I wonder how long we’ll get until the next catastrophe drives us back together. If it’s going to be tonight, I want to get some sleep first. I cover my good ear to block out the strains of the anthem, but then I hear the trumpets and sit straight up in anticipation.

For the most part, the only communication the tributes get from outside the arena is the nightly death toll. But occasionally, there will be trumpets followed by an announcement. Usually, this will be a call to a feast. When food is scarce, the Gamemakers will invite the players to a banquet, somewhere known to all like the Cornucopia, as an inducement to gather and fight. Sometimes there is a feast and sometimes there’s nothing but a loaf of stale bread for the tributes to compete for. I wouldn’t go in for the food, but this could be an ideal time to take out a few competitors.

Claudius Templesmith’s voice booms down from overhead, congratulating the six of us who remain. But he is not inviting us to a feast. He’s saying something very confusing. There’s been a rule change in the Games. A rule change! That in itself is mind bending since we don’t really have any rules to speak of except don’t step off your circle for sixty seconds and the unspoken rule about not eating one another. Under the new rule, both tributes from the same district will be declared winners if they are the last two alive. Claudius pauses, as if he knows we’re not getting it, and repeats the change again.

The news sinks in. Two tributes can win this year. If they’re from the same district. Both can live. Both of us can live.

Before I can stop myself, I call out Peeta’s name.